
Lessons from America's First War with Iran

BRUCE RIEDEL

President Barack Obama has committed the United States to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran seems determined to acquire them. As the United States and Iran approach confrontation and possible war to halt Tehran's nuclear program, it is useful to remember that America has already fought one war with the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the late 1980s, President Ronald Reagan intervened in the Iran-Iraq War in support of Baghdad and Saddam Hussein, ultimately leading to an Iraqi victory. The United States engaged in an undeclared yet bloody naval and air war, while Iraq fought a brutal land war against Iran. The lessons of the first war with Iran should be carefully considered before the United States embarks hastily on a second.

In hindsight, the central lesson of the war in the 1980s is that it is easy to start a conflict with Iran and very difficult to end it. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not easy to intimidate and is likely to retaliate asymmetrically. Another key lesson is to beware the advice of your allies, both Arabs and Israelis, who are prone to give irresponsible recommendations on how to deal with Tehran.

THE TOLL OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Iran-Iraq War was devastating. It was one of the largest and longest conventional interstate wars since the Korean War ended in 1953. A half million lives were lost, and perhaps another million were injured. The economic cost of the war exceeded one trillion dollars.¹ Yet, the battle

*Bruce Riedel is Director of the Intelligence Project at the Brookings Institution. He is a contributor to the book *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988, an oral history of American diplomacy during the war. He was a CIA officer serving in the Middle East during the 1980s.**

lines at the end of the war were almost exactly where they had been at the beginning of hostilities. It was also the only war in modern times in which chemical weapons were used on a massive scale.

Although the war ended in 1988, it led to numerous aftershocks that rippled throughout the region including the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the liberation of Kuwait a year later, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The bloody U.S. war that President Obama recently ended in Iraq

.....
In hindsight, the central lesson of the war in the 1980s is that it is easy to start a conflict with Iran and very difficult to end it. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not easy to intimidate and is likely to retaliate asymmetrically.

was the finale in this march of folly. The seeds of multigenerational tragedy were planted in the Iran-Iraq War. The world will live with its consequences for decades, if not longer.

There were no “good guys” in the Iran-Iraq War, only two brutal dictatorships. Saddam Hussein was a megalomaniac who built enormous, ugly monuments to his ambitions and dreamed of becoming the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, controlling the world’s oil supplies, and destroying Israel. At the end of the first Gulf War

in 1988, Hussein waged genocide against his own Kurdish population. Ayatollah Khomeini created a theocracy in Iran which imprisoned and executed thousands of its own citizens, forced tens of thousands into exile, and even took American diplomats hostage.

U.S. POLICY DURING THE WAR

America had no natural partners in the Iran-Iraq War, but its interests dictated that the United States allow neither Saddam nor Khomeini to dominate the region and the world’s energy supply. For most of the war, it was Iran that appeared on the verge of victory, so Washington had little choice but to support Iraq.

For those who aspire to a national security policy built on the principles of the United Nations Charter or a moral high ground, Iran-Iraq was an immoral swamp. For American policymakers in the 1980s, there was a simple difference. When the war began, Iran held dozens of American diplomats hostage and even tortured some. Only after 444 days in captivity did Iran let the American hostages go. In contrast to Khomeini, many Americans hoped that the Iraqi leader was somehow redeemable and could

be worked with as a difficult but manageable partner. We realize now that this was a mirage, but in the 1980s it was still a hope. Thus, America tilted toward Iraq, hoping it would hold back the “medieval fanatics” to the east from gaining control of the world’s oil reserves.

But “our side” kept breaking the rules. First, Iraq was the aggressor in September 1980. Certainly Iraq had been provoked by Iranian actions along the border, but the main act of aggression was carried out by the Iraqi army in the form of a massive attack. As long as Iraq held Iranian territory, Washington did not call for the restoration of the status quo ante as would be the norm for most international conflicts; only when the tables turned did the United States call for respect for the international border. Then Iraq began using chemical weapons—first, in a piecemeal and largely ineffectual fashion, but by the war’s end, on an industrial scale and with decisive effect. The threat of Iraqi chemical warheads on long range missiles cleared Tehran of many of its inhabitants in 1988, and Saddam began using chemical warheads to systematically kill his own people. Rather than fall silent, the guns of war merely changed theaters with the 1988 cease-fire, as the Anfal campaign against the Iraqi Kurds began, an act of pure genocide by the government that the United States had supported during the war.

The conflict was not President Ronald Reagan’s finest hour. At first he tilted toward Iraq, sending the CIA to Baghdad with critical intelligence in 1982 to thwart Iran’s war plans. It worked. Then Reagan tilted toward Iran, sending sophisticated arms to Tehran in an effort to get American hostages in Lebanon freed. It didn’t work. A few hostages were released but more hostages were taken. Then Reagan tilted back toward Iraq and Washington’s undeclared war followed in 1987 and 1988. The principal architect of the policy was Reagan’s Director of Central Intelligence, Bill Casey, who died before the Iran scandal forced his resignation and possible indictment.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

So what are the lessons of this war for America today? The first lesson is that we should expect to be blamed for all that goes wrong. Both Iraqis and Iranians came to believe the United States was manipulating each of them during the war. Ironically, and perhaps naively, the United States tried to reach out to both belligerents through the course of the war—in great secrecy both times—to try to build a strategic partnership. The disastrous arms-for-hostages policy, which came to be known as the Iran-Contra affair, convinced Iraqis rightly that the United States was trying to play both sides of the conflict. The result was that when the war ended, the

Iraqi regime and most Iraqis regarded the United States as a threat, despite Washington's support during the war. That support had taken the form of critical intelligence assistance to Baghdad, considerable diplomatic cover, and largesse from our Arab allies who loaned tens of billions of dollars to Baghdad to sustain Iraq's war effort.

Iranians call the war the "Imposed War" because they believe the United States subjected them to the conflict and orchestrated the global "tilt" toward Iraq. They note that the United Nations did not condemn Iraq for starting the war. In fact, the UN did not even discuss the war for weeks after it started, and it ultimately considered Iraq to be the aggressor only years later, as part of a deal orchestrated by President George H.W. Bush to free the remaining U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon.

Although the war had tragic consequences for Iran, by portraying the conflict as a "David and Goliath" struggle imposed by the United States and its allies, Iranian leaders managed to consolidate the Islamic Revolution of

For the generation of Iranians who are now leading their country, including men like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the war was the defining event of their lives and a major force in shaping their worldview. Their anti-Americanism and deep suspicion of the West can be traced directly to their understanding of the Iran-Iraq War.

1979. The Revolution was fairly short in duration and its cost was miniscule in comparison to the Iran-Iraq War. For the generation of Iranians who are now leading their country, including men like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the war was the defining event of their lives and a major force in shaping their worldview. Their anti-Americanism and deep suspicion of the West can be traced directly to their understanding of the Iran-Iraq War. We should thus expect the next war to make Iran more extreme and more determined to get the bomb.

Another lesson of the first war is that Iran will not be easily intimidated by the United States. By 1987, Iran was devastated by the war, many of its cities had been destroyed, its oil exports were

minimal, and its economy was shattered. But it did not hesitate to fight the U.S. Navy in the Gulf and to use asymmetric means to retaliate in Lebanon and elsewhere. Even with most of its navy sunk by U.S. Naval forces, Iran kept fighting and the Iranian people continued rallying behind Ayatollah Khomeini.

Iran fought a smart war, avoiding too rapid and too dangerous an escalation. As General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has noted, Iranian behavior is rational, not suicidal.² Iran will not take steps that endanger the revolution's survival; the country will look to exploit America's vulnerabilities in Afghanistan and Bahrain, as well as Israel's in Lebanon and the Saudis' in Yemen. In the 1980s, Iran created Hezbollah in Lebanon to attack American, French, and Israeli targets as punishment for American support of Iraq. Hezbollah then tried to assassinate the emir of Kuwait to punish that country for being Iraq's outlet to the Persian Gulf. In essence, Iran expanded the battlefield of the Iran-Iraq War to other countries where it could exploit security vulnerabilities. We should expect the same in a future war, one for which Iran and Hezbollah have had decades to prepare. Indeed, Iran and Hezbollah are already waging a low intensity terror campaign against Israel from Bulgaria to India, and they have reportedly used cyber warfare against Saudi and Qatari oil companies.³

Another lesson is that ending a future war will be a challenge. In 1988, Iran sued for a cease-fire only after suffering catastrophic defeat on the ground against Iraqi forces and after Saddam Hussein threatened to fire Scud missiles armed with chemical warheads into Iranian cities.⁴ Iranians feared they would face a second "Hiroshima" if they did not accept a truce; indeed many evacuated Tehran in fear of an Iraqi chemical attack. For Khomeini, accepting the truce was like "drinking poison."⁵ No two wars are identical, but history suggests that Iran will not back down easily.

The final lesson is to always scrutinize the advice of allies. Ironically, in the 1980s the closest U.S. partner in the region, Israel, pressed Washington hard and repeatedly to essentially switch sides and offer assistance to Iran. Israeli leaders, generals, and spies were obsessed by the Iraqi threat in the 1980s just as they are preoccupied by the Iranian threat today, and they longed to restore the cozy relationship they had with the Shah in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the Iraq-Iran War, Israel was the only consistent source of spare parts for the Iranian air force's U.S.-made jets.⁶ Israeli leaders, notably Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, brought considerable pressure to bear on Washington for an American engagement with Tehran, and Iran-Contra was in many ways their idea. American diplomats and spies deployed abroad were told to turn a blind eye to Israeli arms deals with Tehran, even when it was official U.S. policy (in the Washington euphemism of the day) to "staunch" all avenues by which the Iranians might obtain weapons or other material needed for their war effort.⁷

America's Arab allies provided equally bad advice. Egypt's President Mubarak, Jordan's King Hussein, and Saudi King Fahd all urged support

for Saddam and Iraq, while turning a blind eye to Saddam's use of chemical weapons against his own people. Egypt sent arms, Jordan sent volunteers, and the Saudis bankrolled Saddam's war, while telling America that he was a born-again moderate who could be worked with and trusted. It was not to be.

Looking back a quarter century after the war in 1988 is revealing and sobering. America accomplished its immediate goals in the first war: it halted Iran's advance into Iraq, defended the tankers in the Gulf, and contained the war from spreading into the Arabian Peninsula. Khomeini did not conquer Basra and Baghdad and march on Jerusalem as he dreamed he would. But today, Iran is the dominant foreign power in Baghdad, thanks in large part to another war America fought in the Gulf. President George W. Bush toppled Saddam and ended his brutal dictatorship, but in doing so, Bush opened the door to a Shia majority government which is much friendlier to Tehran than to Riyadh or Amman, or Washington. These are sobering reminders of the unintended consequences of wars.

The first American war with Iran helped make Iran a more radical and extreme country. A second war may well do the same. Thus another war with Iran to stop its nuclear program may ultimately prove to be the

The first American war with Iran helped make Iran a more radical and extreme country. A second war may well do the same.

..... catalyst that pushes Iran to acquire a dangerous nuclear weapons arsenal. Rather than stopping proliferation, it could incite it further.

History of course does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. Lessons of old wars should be carefully considered before entering new ones. Many Americans have forgotten the lessons

..... of our undeclared war in the 1980s. We have fought so many other wars since: in Iraq (twice), in Afghanistan, and in Libya. While it may be easy for Washington to forget, no Iranian has. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Janet Lang et al, *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988* (Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), ix.
- 2 Fareed Zakaria, "Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: We are of the opinion that the Iranian regime is a 'rational actor,'" CNN Pressroom, February 21, 2012.
- 3 Nicole Perlroth, "In Cyberattack on Saudi firm, U.S. sees Iran firing back," *New York Times*, October 23, 2012.
- 4 Lang, 169.
- 5 Lang, 196.
- 6 Lang, 89.
- 7 Lang, 90.